

MICRO-DEVICE WITH THERMAL ACTUATOR

DESCRIPTION

5 Technical field

10 The present invention relates to a micro-device with an element which deforms under the effect of a thermal actuator. This micro-device may constitute a microswitch which is particularly well-suited to switching of radio frequency signals.

State of prior technology

15 Microswitches are micro-devices which are increasingly used in modern electronic devices one of the major characteristics of which is their increasingly small size. This is the case, notably, with mobile telephones. The design of a microswitch for this type of equipment is confronted with the delicate problem of the on-board available power to activate the microswitches. Current microswitches must be able to be controlled using low voltages (3V for example) and over very short times.

25 The document "Micromechanical relay with electrostatic actuation and metallic contacts" by M.-A. GRETILLAT et al., Transducers '99, June 7-10, 1999, Sendai, Japan, divulges an electrostatically-controlled microswitch requiring a control of around 20 V.

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The document "Bulk micromachined relay with lateral contact" by Zhihong LI et al., published in J. Micromech. Microeng. 10 (2000), pages 329-333, divulges an
5 electrostatically controlled relay using large facing areas. This causes a pneumatic dampening. The system is dampened and the switching times increase. Moreover, technical production of the active line's contact is very difficult and the large number of electrodes involved
10 tends to cause disturbances in the control on the radio frequency signal conveyed by the active line.

Document FR-A-2 772 512 divulges a micro-system, usable notably to produce microswitches or micro-valves,
15 constituted on a substrate and used to obtain triggering between a first operational state and a second operational state by means of a thermal actuator with bimetallic effect. The actuator comprises a deformable element attached, by opposite ends, to the substrate so
20 as to present naturally a deflection without constraint compared to a surface of the substrate opposite it; this natural deflection determines the first operational state, and the second operational state is caused by the thermal actuator which, under the effect of a temperature
25 variation, causes a deformation of the deformable element tending to reduce its deflection and subjecting it to a compression stress which causes triggering of it by a buckling effect in a direction opposite to its natural deflection. This device requires a relatively major

thermal exchange to control it. When the control resistor is heated the member constituting the deformable element dissipates a large proportion of the heat produced (by radiation and conduction). This energy loss must be taken into account in calculating the energy to be applied for control of the bimetallic element. Moreover the structure's trigger time is relatively long as a consequence of the time required for thermal conduction and also as a consequence of the losses by radiation with the environment which must be compensated during heating.

Account of the invention

To remedy the disadvantages mentioned above, a micro-device is proposed comprising conductors located on a first level and conductors located on a second level, where the conductors of the first level are supported by a deformable element which can trigger by means of an actuator with bimetallic effect; the effect of the triggering is to modify the gap between the conductors on the first level and the conductors on the second level, characterised in that the actuator with bimetallic effect consists of resistors in close and localised contact with the deformable element, and in that the resistors are able, when traversed by an electric control current, to expand sufficiently under the effect of the heat produced by the passage of the electric control current to cause, by a bimetallic effect, a triggering of the deformable

element before the heat produced in the resistors has been able to propagate in the deformable element.

The deformable element is preferably a member or a
5 membrane.

Electrostatic holders may be included to hold the deformable element in the position it has after it is triggered, when the control current is cancelled. The
10 electrostatic holders may include at least one pair of electrodes facing one another, with one of these electrodes forming a single piece with the deformable element, and the other being located such that, when the deformable element has triggered, the gap between the
15 facing electrodes is minimal.

In one variant embodiment, the electrostatic holders include at least one pair of facing electrodes, with one of these electrodes forming a single piece with the
20 deformable element, and the other being located such that, when the deformable element has triggered, the electrodes are in contact with one another but separated by electrical insulators.

25 The resistors may include at least one layer deposited in the shape of a wave. This leads to improved efficiency for the actuator.

The resistors are preferably made from a material chosen from aluminium, manganese, zinc, gold, platinum, nickel or inconel 600.

5 If the micro-deposit is accomplished using micro-technology techniques, the deformable element may originate from a layer deposited on a substrate.

10 In a first embodiment, the conductors located on the second level include a first line contact and a second line contact, and the effect of triggering the deformable element is to reduce to zero the distance between the conductors on the first level and the conductors on the second level, with the first level conductors thus
15 forming an electrical link between the first contact and the second contact, and the micro-device thus constituting a microswitch. The conductors supported by the deformable element are ideally constituted by a conductive block.

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In a second embodiment, the first level conductors and the second level conductors respectively constitute a first electrode and a second electrode of a condenser, and where this condenser has a first capacity value
25 before the triggering of the deformable element and a second capacity value after the triggering of the deformable element.

According to one variant embodiment, an insulating layer of high dielectric constant separates the first electrode and the second electrode of the condenser. This insulating layer, of thickness less than 0.1 m for example, may be located on one of the two electrodes, or on both of them.

Brief description of drawings

10 The invention will be better understood and other advantages and features will appear on reading the description below, which is given as a non-limiting example, accompanied by the annexed drawings among which:

15 - figure 1 is a schematic, perspective view of a microswitch according to the invention,

- figures 2 and 3 are views, respectively in longitudinal and transverse sections, of the microswitch represented in perspective in figure 1,

20 - figure 4 is a view of the microswitch corresponding to figure 2 but where the thermal actuator has been activated,

25 - figure 5 is a detail view of the microswitch represented in figures 1 to 4 showing an embodiment of the thermal actuator,

- figure 6 is a view from above of a preferred resistor usable for the microswitch according to the invention.

5 Detailed description of embodiments of the invention

Figure 1 (perspective view) and figures 2 and 3 (section views) illustrate a microswitch according to the present invention.

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This microswitch is produced on a substrate 1, for example made from silicon, silica, glass or quartz. Substrate 1 supports a first section of line 2 terminated by a contact 4 and a second section of line 3 terminated by a contact 5. Contacts 4 and 5 are simply separated by a small interval.

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Substrate 1 supports one or more layers, made from an electrical insulating material, designated as single reference 10 and from which a deformable element has been produced in the form of member 11 (for example made from silicon nitride or silicon oxide) able to be deformed in a cavity 12 of layer 10 revealing the substrate 1 and contacts 4 and 5. Member 11 has, on the side of cavity 12, a conductive block 13 able to form an electrical link between contacts 4 and 5 when member 11 deflects in cavity 12. This microswitch may be achieved by the process divulged in document FR-A-2 772 512 mentioned above.

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The member (or membrane if applicable) may be formed through the stacking of layers of different expansion coefficients.

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Member 11 supports two resistors 14 and 15 located towards the ends of the member. These resistors may be deposits of a conductive material, for example aluminium, manganese, zinc, gold, platinum, nickel or inconel 600. They are linked to current sources by unrepresented connection lines.

Figure 2 shows electrostatically held electrodes arranged in pairs and facing one another: the pair of electrodes 16 and 17 firstly, and the pair of electrodes 18 and 19 secondly. Electrodes 16 and 18 are supported by member 11. They can also be included in the member. Electrodes 17 and 19 are placed at the bottom of cavity 12, on substrate 1. Unrepresented connection lines allow these electrodes to be linked to appropriate voltage sources.

Figures 2 and 3 show the microswitch at rest, with the actuator not activated. Conductive block 13 does not form the electrical link between contacts 4 and 5.

When the actuator is activated by passing an electrical current through resistors 14 and 15, the resulting heat produced causes, by a bimetallic effect,

the deflection of the member to the bottom of cavity 12. Conductive block 13 comes to rest on contacts 4 and 5 and causes an electrical link between line sections 2 and 3. This is what is shown in figure 4.

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Electrodes 16 and 17 firstly, and 18 and 19 secondly, which are then at their minimum distance or in contact but separated by a thin insulating layer, hold the deflected member electrostatically by the application of appropriate voltages when the electrical current has stopped passing through resistors 14 and 15. The electrostatic holding voltages may be applied to electrodes 16, 17 and 18, 19 when the thermal actuator has already caused the member to deflect. They may also be applied before the member deflects so as to accelerate this deflection.

To open the microswitch, one need merely cancel the electrostatic holding voltages. The member then returns to its rest position, and this happens more rapidly if the parts heated by the resistors have had time to cool.

In order for the deflection of the member to occur as rapidly as possible, and for it to return to its rest position, the thermal actuator must have properties of the quasi-adiabatic type. To this end the bimetallic effect relative to the member and the resistor only applies to part of the member, but this is sufficient to cause it to trigger.

The time for the rise in temperature of elements 14 and 15 must be very short for application to switching of radio frequency signals, which are as a general rule less than 10 s. They must thus be made of a material which heats very rapidly. The Young module and the thermal expansion factor must thus be considered. At the same time, its geometrical characteristics must be determined.

10 In practice a material is chosen which is likely to be suitable. The change in deflection of the member according to an applied temperature is examined. This change essentially has a sinusoid shape. The temperature enabling a contact to be obtained in the case of a switch
15 (or the desired capacity in the case of a variable condenser) is determined. After this the two points of inflection of the sinusoid are determined. The particularly advantageous length for the resistor to be is that determined from the distance between the
20 embedding point of the member and the inflection point.

The mechanical properties of the member are studied to determine its most appropriate thickness and then its most favourable geometry. The triggering temperature is
25 then determined.

The flection control consists in heating only the resistors without heating the adjacent member or the environment of the resistors. For the return to the non-

deflected position, the resistors must in principle return to the ambient temperature before the electrostatic holding is released.

5 Figure 5 shows an embodiment of the thermal actuator. This is a detailed view of one end of member 11. When an electrical current activating the actuator traverses resistor 15, the resulting heat expands the resistor and allows the member to be deflected.

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Figure 6 is a view from above of a resistor 25 usable by the present invention. This view shows that resistor 25 is in the shape of a wave. It has the advantage of improving the thermal actuator's efficiency.

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The microswitch according to the invention operates at an available voltage of 3 V. To use this voltage value optimally, it is preferable to have two resistors connected in series.

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